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Editorial: Animals as dark tourism attractions: experiences, contexts, and ethics

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Animals as dark tourism attractions: experiences, contexts, and ethics

As a field of study, dark tourism, also known as thanatourism, has focused on understanding the motivations, experiences, and ethical implications of visiting sites associated with human death, suffering, and tragedy caused by human and/or environmentally induced events. Dark tourism sites include places such as dungeons, cemeteries, former notorious prisons, shrines, as well as sites of genocide, atrocity, and catastrophe. Tourists visiting these sites are usually motivated by feelings of simple curiosity, empathy, moral duty, and remembrance, as well as a fascination with death and violence. The field has grown in prominence, especially as more people are in search for immersive historical or emotional experiences when traveling. Although dark tourism is interdisciplinary, drawing from fields such as tourism studies, sociology, history, anthropology, and ethics, much of the discussion has traditionally focused on humans and human suffering. Dark tourism scholarship has primarily focused on the commodification and commercialization of deathscapes, places where tragedies, disasters, or historically significant human deaths have occurred (Martini and Buda, 2020; Sharma, 2020; Stone, 2009; Tarlow, 2005). Even when animals are mentioned in dark tourism, their role is typically incidental, serving as objects for human use or as companions to human death and suffering (Fennell et al., 2021; López-López and Quintero Venegas, 2021).

Only recently has the scope expanded to include animals as a subject of dark tourism. This can also be viewed as a consequence of the growing debate surrounding the darker side of animal-based tourism. For instance, documentaries like “Blackfish” and “Sled Dogs” have sparked public discussions and ethical concerns regarding the use of animals for entertainment. Similarly, the case of Marius the giraffe, who was euthanized and dissected publicly at the Copenhagen Zoo, as well as the sad story of Pizza, the polar bear displayed in a Chinese shopping mall, are examples of cases which have intensified the ethical scrutiny of such attractions. There are currently a series of recent works confirming the link between animals, tourists, and the darker side of the tourism industry (e.g., Fennell et al., 2021; Fennell and Sheppard, 2020; García-Rosell and Hancock, 2024; López-López and Quintero Venegas, 2021; Panko and George, 2018). This emerging body of literature attempts to frame the exploitation and use of animals within the context of dark tourism, allowing for the further exploration of ethical and moral issues related to the status of animals in the tourism industry. In particular, the work of Fennell et al. (2021) has contributed

to advancing dark tourism research by developing a typology used to classify animals as dark tourism attractions. This typology consists of three key categories: the characteristics of animal suffering and death, the subjective/normative nature of the animal-human relationship leading to such suffering or death, and the role of the tourism industry and supply. It offers valuable directions for dark tourism research from an animal-centric perspective, which are also explored in the three articles included in the Research Topic at hand.

In this special edition, the article by Fennell and Sheppard problematize the instrumental and utilitarian arguments used to justify and legitimize the exploitation of animals in tourism. Relying upon the case of bullfighting, they critically examine the attitudes of tourists toward this highly controversial form of animal-based tourism. By conducting a thematic analysis of 74 TripAdvisor posts published between the years 2012 and 2022, they examine both the negative and positive perceptions associated with bullfighting as a tourist attraction and a component of the Spanish destination brand. While the majority of posts describe bullfighting in terms of cruelty, unfairness, and torture, a minority associate it with culture, ceremony, and history. The paper also explores the bullfighting-as-culture vs. animals-for-human-consumption debate, as one of the more poignant and thought-provoking discussions amongst the various participant posts. Fennell and Sheppard's study not only situates bullfighting within the context of dark tourism, but also highlights the ethical implications of similar animal-based tourism attractions where animal suffering and death are integral to the visitor experience.

The article by Guo et al. approach the giant panda as a dark tourism attraction embodying a process of making and remaking Chinese national identities over the past two centuries. Using “virtual curating” to analyse the Giant Panda Museum located at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, the authors reveal how the death of the first giant panda and his history has come to symbolize an embodiment of complex interactions between the East and West, where science, colonial expansion, and the construction of national identities are intricately intertwined. By exploring these dynamics, the authors demonstrate how China's cultural attachment toward the giant panda can be framed within a dark tourism narrative. As they argue, understanding the giant panda's history through a dark tourism lens offers an ethical perspective from which to assess the relationship between tourists and pandas.

The article by Yerbury seeks to extend the discussion about animals as dark tourism objects, by focusing on the examples of zoos and aquaria. To achieve this, she adopts a post-humanistic perspective and draws upon the typology

of animals as dark tourism attractions developed by Fennell et al. (2021). Her study illustrates how zoos and aquaria align with the dark tourism framework by embodying animal suffering through impeded wellbeing. Animals in these artificial environments experience injustice and are subjected to dominant narratives of human superiority and control (Fennell and Sheppard, 2020). Considering this, she concludes that zoos and aquaria qualify as dark tourism attractions that can never embody deep justice, as they intrinsically undermine animal freedom and agency.

The papers in this Research Topic examine three types of attractions: bullfighting; the Giant Panda Museum; and, zoos and aquariums. Each paper not only expands the notion of what constitutes a dark tourism experience, but also draws attention to the importance of recognizing animals as sentient, suffering beings rather than mere objects of human entertainment and/or consumption. Such recognition is crucial for the moral transformation of an industry where the exploitation, enslavement, and killing of animals have been normalized and widely accepted as part of the tourism experience. These studies present the tip of the research iceberg, in terms of evaluating the human-animal relationship from a tourism ethics perspective.

Author contributions

J-CG-R: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. VS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DF: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

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